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ABSTRACT

The historical relationship between members of different racial and ethnic groups and the dominant culture in the United States is characterized by dominant/submissive postures. Communication between such groups in a contemporary setting tends to be riddled by the tensions and hostilities inherent in such an historical relationship. Linguistic barriers to interracial communication are produced by the development and use of contracultural language codes within our society, designed to ensure culture-group survival. Contracultural language codes or argots serve as a means for both expression of hostile reactions and preservation of group integrity. The historical plight of the Jews of Spain during the Inquisition; the code of the Pachuco, an argot of youth drawing from Mexican and American slang; black argot; and Japanese-American Nisei argot are discussed in this paper, in relation to the respective language codes' capacities to serve as a cultural storehouse for expression of hostility toward the dominant culture and maintenance of the identity and group solidarity of these "out groups." (Author/LG)

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# CONTRACULTURAL LANGUAGE CODES: THE LANGUAGE OF SURVIVAL

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It is commonplace by now to acknowledge how the barriers of diverse languages separate peoples of different nations. We tend to overlook, however, the ways in which linguistic barriers function to interfere with communication between members of the same societal structure. Within the United States, divergence in language characteristics provides one of the major obstacles to interaction between members of our various sub and countercultures and members of the dominant culture (and by dominant culture, I mean specifically the white Anglo Saxon culture). The linguistic barrier to interracial communication which I should like to discuss today is that produced by the development and use of contraculture language codes within our society.

Before I proceed, a few brief definitions seem in order. In defining "language," I shall refer to Sapir and his concept of language as: "A purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols."[1] By culture, I mean simply the shared understandings of appropriate behavior employed by any group as a means of perpetuating that group and maintaining social control. A subculture, of course, is a group smaller than the total society which emphasizes a different set of understandings (such as food habits, dress patterns, religious rites, etc.). I also include in my definition of a subculture the stipulation that members of this group, while they differ from those of the dominant culture, do not put any pressure on the larger structure to change. A counterculture, on the other hand, is a group smaller than the larger society which represents not only a different set of behavioral understandings, but an opposite set of concepts regarding appropriate behavior. A counterculture represents a reaction against the dominant culture,

and unlike a subculture, the counterculture does pressure the larger society toward some kind of modification. Finally, by interracial communication (as opposed to intercultural communication), I am referring to communication between members of different racial and/or ethnic groups in the United States whose historical relationship has been characterized by dominant/submissive postures. Such communication in a contemporary setting tends to be riddled by the tensions and hostilities inherent in such an historical relationship. In other words, I am referring, for the most part, to communication between whites and nonwhites, though I do not wish to get into the murkey waters of defining the physiological features those terms suggest. So bear with me and allow me to move on to safer ground.

An excerpt from Malcolm X's Autobiography will serve best to introduce the subject of contracultural language codes to you.

> After a Harlem street rally, one of these downtown "leaders" and I were talking when we were approached by a Harlem hustler. To my knowledge, I'd never seen this hustler before; he said to me approximately: "Hey baby, I dig you holding this all-originals scene at the track . . . I'm going to lay a vine under the Jew's Balls for a dime--got to give you a play . . . Got the shorts out here trying to scuffle upon on some bread . . . Well, my man, I'll get on . . . got to go peck a little and cop me some Z's . . ." and the hustler went up Seventh Avenue.[2]
>
> I would never have given it another thought, except that this downtown "leader" was standing, staring after that hustler, looking as if he'd just heard sanskrit. He asked me what had been said, and I told him. The hustler had said that he was aware that the Muslims were holding an all-black bazaar at Rockland Palace which is primarily a dancehall. The hustler intended to pawn a suit for ten dollars and patronize the bazaar. He had very little money, but he was trying hard to make some. He was going to eat, and then he would get some sleep.

A frequent occurrence within a counterculture is the development of a contracultural language code, a means of expression which serves both to express hostile reactions and to preserve the integrity of the group. Another

term which is used to refer to such a code is "argot." Edith Folb, who has just recently completed a study of black argot in the Los Angeles ghetto defines argot as follows: "These particular characteristics - usage limited to a particular group or class, secrecy, and usage associated with members outside the dominant culture - form the basis for the definition of argot."[3]

Argot performs many important functions for the counterculture. First, it serves as a means of self-defense. Remember, countercultural members see themselves as living in a threatening environment, and they are at odds with the basic societal structure. For members of this counterculture to survive, in a basically hostile environment, they must have the means of communicating to each other while excluding detection by the unfriendly forces they see at work against them. According to Mauer, there must be a threat from the dominant culture in order for a countercultural argot to develope and flourish.[4] An outstanding example of the way in which argot developes as a means of self-defense is the historical plight of the Jews of Spain during the Inquisition. As you will probably recall, during the Inquisition, the nonbelievers of Spain (mostly Jews and Moslems) were given the option of renouncing their own beliefs and conforming to the will of the Church, leaving the country, or . . . the rack. Many Jews left for other Mediterranean countries such as Turkey, Italy, Greece, and North Africa, taking the Spanish language with them, and preserving that language as they settled in their new lands. Their form of Spanish became a code by which all Mediterranean Jews could identify each other. To this day, the Jews of Italy and Greece and Turkey (known as Sephardim) communicate through the use of Spanish. Other Jews, of course, did not leave Spain. They wanted their cake . . . all of it, so, to the outside world, they were good Catholics, and amongst themselves, they continued to practice forbidden Jewish rituals. To

preserve this capacity for duplicity, they developed a code language . . . Ladino Spanish . . . a medieval form of Spanish, through which they could exclude non-Jewish Spaniards. Yiddish, of course, a form of German, has served the same function for the Jews of Middle and Eastern Europe. Leo Rosten tells a story which seems to exemplify the importance of Yiddish as a cultural preservative. A small boy and his mother were on a bus in Tel Aviv. The boy spoke to his mother in Hebrew and the mother kept responding in Yiddish. Finally, the mother insisted that the boy speak in Yiddish. An impatient fellow passenger questioned the mother as to why she insisted that the boy speak Yiddish. The mother replied: "I don't want him to forget he's Jewish."

There are several such contracultural codes operative now in the United States. One which I recall quite vividly from my youth in San Diego is that developed and employed by the Pachuco counterculture. Prevalent in the Southwestern United States, the code of the Pachuco was an argot of youth drawing from Mexican and American slang. Because many Pachucos were involved in illegal drug activities, many of their code words deal with drugs and drug related acts. "Camello," for example, is a word drawn from the Camel cigarette which refers to a marijuana cigarette. "Cargo Blanco," in literal translation means white cargo, but in code, it refers to a shipment of cocaine or morphine. A "submarino" literally means submarine, of course, but is a code word for a yellow barbiturate pill. "Pildoro" refers to a smuggler of pills, and one of my favorites, "trompeta" literally means trumpet, and in code, it designates an informer. The black culture today has many code words which apply to drugs and drug related behavior as well. Since the "drug" culture is illegal in terms of the dominant society, code words become essential to protect the user from the negative sanctions of

the power center. In black argot, words such as "gunny," "skoofer," and "stencil" refer to marijuana cigarettes, while "blunts" and "fender benders" designate various forms of pills.

A second function of argot, aside from its use as a means of self-defense, is its capacity to serve as a cultural storehouse for the hostility felt by the counterculture toward the dominant culture. A secret code enables its users to express a felt hatred for the dominant culture without the members of the more powerful group detecting such expressions and punishing the users of the code. Argot embodies many words and expressions of racial derision which are designed to be used "in-house" and out of earshot of those being derided. Many black words designating the white man encompass this hostility. Whites are referred to as "beasts," "honkies," "Paddies," "peckerwoods," "devils," "the Man," "gray," and a policeman is referred to as "Irvine." The Yiddish argot to which I referred previously is filled with words referring to non-Jews in a highly pejorative fashion: "Goyim" and "schutzim," "schagetz" and "schiksa," not only point out and isolate those who are not Jewish, but such isolation suggests that the referents are somewhat less desirable than are the members of the "out-group." The commonly heard expression in Jewish circles: "It's too good for the goyim" reflects the deep hostility Jews feel toward non-Jews whom they regard as oppressors.

Even the Japanese-American Nisei, frequently cited as the most "successful" racial minority (and the least hostile) employ certain Japanese words as code euphemisms which direct hostility toward the dominant culture and members of other racial and ethnic groups. The white man is referred to as Hakujen (which literally means white man) or in more pejorative terms . . . Keto (a hairy person or barbarian). One of the most creative and fascinating

of the code words I have come across which expresses this hostility is the word the Nisei employ to refer to Jews. It should be noted that anti-semitism is almost unknown in Japan. It is a European attitude imported to the United States, and it was in the United States that the Japanese first became exposed to anti-semitism. Much too polite to ever adopt the traditional derisive terms the dominant culture employs to refer to Jews, such as Kike and Sheeny, the Nisei invented a cleverly disguised means of referring to one central idea of the Jewish stereotype. They created the neologism Ku-Ichi, which refers not so much to Jews as it does to the quality of stinginess. Ku-Ichi is a combination of the Japanese words Ku, which is nine, and Ichi, which is one in Japanese. Nine plus one equals ten, and the Japanese word for ten is JU, a homonym for the English word Jew. Ku-Ichi is definitely argot, since its meaning is not known in Japan. The term "Yudaya Jin" is the denotation in Japan for Jew.

Beyond serving as a means of self-defense and of the expression of hostility toward the dominant group, contracultural language codes or argot also serve to maintain the identity and group solidarity of the counterculture. As exemplified by the mother in Tel Aviv, argot enables the group members to identify each other and outsiders. Like the Jews remaining in Spain during the Inquisition, members of countercultures employing secret language codes exhibit a determination to survive on their own terms.

Argot exists so long as those employing it feel threatened by outside forces. Fear of the dominant society motivates members to keep language codes secret and exclusive. The escape of the argot into the general population signals a demise of the out-group and a weakening of the tensions between the counterculture and the dominant culture. Large numbers of words escape from the counterculture through friendly contacts with the dominant

culture, and such contact means that the assimilation of the counterculture is under way. Argot should be viewed as an out-group cultural preservative, and as it becomes co-opted by the dominant group, the counterculture becomes ripe for extinction. Such a process may well explain why certain counter-cultural members, blacks for example, are so defensive of their secret codes, and why they resent whites employing such expressions as "right on" and "brother." The necessity for secrecy also explains why it is so difficult to do research on contracultural codes. Those employing it are reluctant to allow the argot to seep into the public domain, and once such an occurrence has transpired, the counterculture must invent a new code in order to survive as a counterculture. Thus, by exposing the argot, we destroy its function and only make it necessary for the group in question to develope more secretive codes to keep out of the reach of researchers peeking in from the dominant society. As Mauer states:

> In fact, we have more linguistic and anthropological data on obscure primitive cultures from the South Seas to the Cape of Good Hope than we have on our own microsystems. Yet, the hostility between the sub cultures and the dominant culture continues to generate, especially in the urban centers, intracultural conflict which has an increasingly deleterious effect on the dominant culture itself.[5]

It is almost cliché by now to note that when a black or a youth says "that's bad" and really means "that's good" the resulting confusion on the part of the white adult receiver is extreme. Because contracultural codes serve a self-defense function, the meanings of the terms are kept secret; hence, since whites cannot break the code significantly, they frequently experience a failure in productive interracial interaction. Contracultural language codes, or argot, must thus be placed on that long list together with the myriad of other reasons why interracial communication is so volatile and lacking in accuracy of transmission.

1. Edward Sapir, Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co.), 1920, p. 7.

2. Malcolm X, Autobiography of Malcolm X, (New York: Grove Press), 1965, p. 315.

3. Edith Folb, "A Comparative Study of Urban Black Argot," in Occasional Papers in Linguistics, No. 1, UCLA (March 1972), 10.

4. David W. Mauer, "Linguistics Hostility As a Factor in Intracultural Conflict," paper presented to International Congress of Linguistics, Bucharest, Rumania, August 1967, p. 4.

5. Ibid., p. 7.